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How Teenagers Deal with their Privacy on Social Network Sites?

Results from a National Survey in France

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Abstract

This paper proposes to examine the case of privacy concerns and privacy management for teenagers on Social Network Sites, according to a national survey being carried out in France since January 2008 by two University research teams in management sciences, sociology and computing, for the French National Postal Service.

Teenagers and social network sites

It is evident that Social network sites (SNS) have been the big internet phenomenon over the past few years. We define these sites as web-based services that allow individuals to:

(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) identify a list of other users with whom they share a connection, (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system - the nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (boyd, Ellison, 2007) - and (4) base their interest mainly on these first three points and not on any particular activity (Stenger, Coutant, 2010, 2009a).

From the early success of *Friendster* to the rise of *Facebook*, these sites are particularly popular with teenagers in Europe and in the United States, where they represented about 35 % of users in September 2009¹ (see also Ofcom 2008, ComScore, 2008, 2009).

The media link their popular success with the potential risk regarding privacy (cf. *infra*). On this subject, users around the world behave in very different ways, from ignorance and lack of concern to strong collective demonstration and activism, as Facebook experienced with the “beacon widget” or the “Newsfeed group”. Meanwhile, SNS are vigorously requested by regulators, particularly in Europe (cf. the European Commission² - EC) to help users protect their privacy, especially in the case of young people. The creation of the “social networking task force” in April 2008 within the EC, new EC directives on online privacy, the recent agreement with 17 social platforms and specific

EC funded projects such as “Insafe³”, dedicated to help parents and teachers guide children in their safe exploration of the World, are focusing in particular on teenagers’ privacy and SNS. Most of the existing academic research on SNS has focused on identity management, self-presentation, online friendships and privacy concerns, especially with regard to teenagers. Some SNS (not all of them) enable users to control the level of privacy for their own profile, but this does not mean that users, especially teenagers, actually do so. First it is necessary to explore whether teenagers feel concerned with their privacy whilst using SNS. Secondly, if they do (and some of them do in certain circumstances as will be explained), it is interesting to analyze how they deal with this issue and manage both their privacy and identity online.

Thus, this paper proposes to examine the case of privacy concerns and privacy management for teenagers on SNS, according to a national survey being carried out in France since January 2008 by two University research teams in management sciences, sociology and computing, for the French National Postal Service.

1. Teenagers’ privacy on SNS in Press literature

It is interesting to note that popular press coverage of SNS has emphasized potential privacy concerns, primarily concerning the safety of younger users (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Over the last two years, this phenomenon has increased all around the world, each country identifying potential threats to private information usage (e.g. the *New York times* and *Le Monde* – in France – regularly publish articles on online personal exposure and identity theft ; the BBC’s investigation into how to harvest personal data on Facebook⁴ ; the editing of “Marc’s biography” by *Le Tigre* (a French newspaper) based on personal data gathered online⁵ ...). The idea that giving up your privacy is a cost of living online has even been debated in various magazines in Europe and in the USA.

¹ For daily statistics, see

[<http://www.checkfacebook.com/>](http://www.checkfacebook.com/)

² [<http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/social_networking/index_en.htm>](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/social_networking/index_en.htm)

³ <http://www.saferinternet.org/>

⁴

[<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/click_online/7375772.stm>](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/click_online/7375772.stm)

⁵ [<http://www.le-tigre.net/Marc-L.html>](http://www.le-tigre.net/Marc-L.html)

Researchers have investigated the potential threats to privacy associated with SNS, beginning with work on user practices since 2005. The results are controversial.

The first research results identified the gap between users' opinions about privacy and their behavior (Acquisti and Gross, 2006 ; Stutzman, 2006 ; Barnes 2006 ; Gross and Acquisti, 2005), that they would like to protect their privacy but do not necessarily manage to do so. This "privacy paradox" evoked by many authors is explained in several ways. Teenagers are not always aware of the public and open nature of the platforms, nor do they necessarily know that they could set and control their privacy. Dwyer et al. (2008) explain that teenagers do not realize how much their private life is exposed, nor do they realize who else can access their profile. Ellison et al. (2007) report in their research on Facebook users that 70% either did not know they could set the privacy settings and control their account, or that their profile was visible by the entire MSN network. Only 13% limited access only to their friends.

But other survey results show a different perspective of the situation. The Pew Survey indicates that teens are aware of potential privacy threats online and as a consequence adopt specific behaviors: 66% of teenagers using a profile report that it is not visible to all Internet users (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Of the teenagers with completely open profiles, 46% reported that they included at least some false information, protecting themselves by doing so – and because fake information is part of the fun on SNS.

However, it must be assumed that online privacy management on SNS involves multiple user competences. Technical skills are required and, as the platform evolves, the ability to learn to use online tools and devices is fundamental. The ability to control the impression given and manage social contexts is also of crucial importance as SNS lead to exposure, invasion or social convergence when online, and disparate social contexts glide into one (boyd, 2008). Online, the disappearance or the lack of clear context drives users to imagine their profile's audience and they are often misguided. Because online practice deals with friendship-driven activities in familiar contexts (Ito et al., 2008), young people are tempted to believe that their friends represent their audience, whereas the audience can be much broader (boyd, 2007).

Researchers in social network analysis have also shown some interest in privacy on SNS. Lewis et al. (2008) observe a mimetism among students as far as privacy management on Facebook is concerned. Students are more likely to have a private profile if their friends and room-mates have one. They also observe statistically that women are more likely to have private profiles than men, and that having a private profile is associated with a higher level of online activity. In conclusion, the "taste for privacy" is considered to be a personal and cultural trait.

Privacy also deals with social position, as highlighted by a recent French study trying to link the kind of information being shared with socio-professional status⁶. Results

clearly show that the lower the social status, the higher the amount and intimacy of information shared. Thus, privacy management in online contexts appears to be becoming socially discriminatory and may be associated with the risk that French politicians are calling "digital divide".

2. Methodology

This research project started in January 2008 and relies on in-depth interviews of 65 French teenagers and young adults (14-27 years old), 22 months of online participative observation on the most popular SNS in France (Facebook, Skyrock, Myspace, Netlog, Lexode), an analysis of the platform design with computer scientists and a systematic profile analysis. The main issues considered deal with a definition of these sites and a specific methodology, what activities are teenagers actually doing online, what do 'profiles' or 'friends' mean for them, how do they learn to use these sites and incorporate them into their everyday life, and is there a link with consumption in these activities (Stenger, Coutant, 2010, 2009a, b, c).

3. Is privacy on SNS an issue for French teenagers?

In order to understand how teenagers define the kind of information they are giving out on SNS, we asked the teenagers who were interviewed about subjects such as:

Are you aware of the debate dealing with privacy on SNS and do you care? Have you changed the default privacy on your profiles and why? Do you differentiate between some kinds of personal information you wouldn't like to see on these sites? Have you ever had trouble with maintaining your privacy on SNS? Who would you not want to see the information you are sharing on your profile?

As seen in the literature, the results are quite paradoxical, but in different ways. Firstly, the interviews reveal that almost all teenagers admit knowing that this information is public: "*one wouldn't publish it if one didn't want others to know*" one of them tells us. Having admitted that, they maintain that they are fully responsible, and that they are already sharing this information through other resources, such as emails or off-line conversations. However on the other hand, they are fairly reluctant with regard to what employers might think about them. On this latter point, the older teenagers interviewed said they are concerned that future employers may judge them because of the information available on their profile. Younger people share a very different point of view: basically, they do not care. This is one of the most interesting issues of this survey: linking these anxieties to the prospect of joining the working population. On the one hand, all of those interviewed share the opinion that what they are doing on these sites isn't important. As far as they are concerned, they say they are just « hanging out » (an expression found in both our verbatims and in boyd and Ito & al.'s surveys),

⁶<http://sociogeek.admin-mag.com/resultat/Echantillon.html>

(boyd, 2007, 2008; Ito & al., 2008) or chatting about parties. On the other hand, an increase in anxiety is clearly perceptible as they progress through the school stages: schoolchildren and high school students do not feel concerned, university level students begin to feel a little anxious when commencing professional training courses (provoking anxiety in barely 50% of students) and only those closest to an outlet to possible job opportunities admit to being very anxious (several talk about quitting SNS, even if they don't do so).

Let's emphasise here the media attitude, which is illustrative of what researchers are calling "media panics" (Milligen, 2006; Mc Robbie, 1994; Critcher, 2003). The media are playing a large role in the rise of anxiety in some teenagers, as early interviews, from the beginning of 2008 before the media started to report regularly on privacy risks on SNS, did not reveal any particular fears of being observed. In fact only one type of "invisible audience" boyd refers to (2008) is posing problems. Indeed, being observed by parents or being hounded by predators does not appear to concern teenagers, as they believe that they are easily able to escape them. They spoke of the same kind of tactics boyd has already highlighted in her studies for escaping parents or educators (boyd, 2007, 2008): by creating fake or "official" profiles, using nicknames or changing several letters in their name, disclosing their profile addresses only in places where guardians can't see them (during school breaks or on instant messengers). As far as predators are concerned, teenagers do not regard the risk that they be contacted as important because they don't see how predators could find them on the Web or offline. One can see that they are confusing protection against their guardians, for whom pen names and false names make it difficult to find a particular person, with that against predators, who are not looking for a particular person and can land on any profile. In this way, we perceive a relative incompetence in protecting themselves against being identified: they do not all give their real address or their phone number but they often indicate their school, talk about their activities and the clubs they belong to, and share numerous photos of themselves in various identifiable locations.

The teenagers were also asked about one last type of "invisible audience". Privacy does not appear to be a concern when it comes to brands, marketing services or to data set by SNS. As far as this particular audience is concerned, young people do not feel at all threatened! Discussing the use of their personal information by companies and marketing services or by SNS in order to increase targeted ads leaves them completely indifferent. Neither do they care about what kind of information may be used by an application they install on their Facebook profile. They argue that their activities are mainly "friendship-driven online activities" (Ito & al., 2008), and even doubt that this data could be useful in any way. In fact, most of their activities must not be interpreted as face values. The understanding of the switch from face

value to private joke thus requires an intimate understanding of the people involved.

The answers given show that if teenagers clearly distinguish between their audiences, SNS pose problems only when they do not allow you easily to keep these audiences separate. Technical options as well as social tactics allow young people to deal with most of their audiences and to keep social contexts separate, with the exception of employers. As far as predators are concerned, educators must handle the fact that teenagers do not understand the risks they are facing on SNS, and must teach them to distinguish between a search for an individual and the seeking of a type/category of person, which is possible through more general geographical information. We will now analyze more deeply how teenagers succeed or not in managing this privacy on SNS.

4. Teenagers' Identity and Privacy Management on SNS: issues, skills and tactics

Privacy management isn't just about one's own feeling of confidence in these sites. Privacy management must be understood as an individual set of skills that goes deeper than conscious and voluntary behaviours. As far as teenagers are concerned, these skills deal on the one hand with creating an autonomous space for their generation and keeping it safe from others, on the other hand with promoting themselves by constructing a space looking « cool » for their peers.

This second set of skills is the more obvious, as teenagers are very preoccupied with interacting with their peers so that they look popular. Several studies have already highlighted how teenagers used these sites to watch and imitate the actions of the most popular people (boyd, 2007; Ito & al., 2008). SNS could even be seen as a second chance for the less popular teenagers in offline contexts (Zywica, Danowski, 2008). French teenagers have quite similar preoccupations. Nevertheless, the kind of skills required in what Goffman calls 'interaction order' (Goffman, 1983) are shared by everyone. One can observe an importation of the rules of interaction which are easily adapted to the technical specificities of SNS. It bypasses the auto-censorship of potentially delicate information. Teenagers are particularly aware of the necessity of portraying another face (Goffman, 1974) and they prove they can handle the fact that identity is a construction made as much by others as by oneself. The negotiations around each self -production are totally fixed, whether that be technically because of the design of the SNS which encourages positive creations (Facebook only permits us to "like" other people's actions, "anti" groups are forbidden), or socially through collective penalties, and exclusion, of tactless participants. The role distance shown by people interacting protect themselves as each interactant plays his own role in an ironic or distanced way: all the teenagers claim that they know that their activity is just a waste of time. SNS are much appreciated by teenagers to manage their everyday relationships with their peers. It allows them

to manage more effectively many difficult activities (flirting, dating, quarrels between friends) by benefitting from the specific aspects of the tool: asynchronous discussions, body-effacement which is a specific teenager issue as the body is so hard to handle with during adolescence (breaking of the voice, blushing, sweating...). Teenagers even poach (Certeau, 2002) these specific aspects to allow themselves to break the rules for just a moment: some of them create fake profiles to spy on others, or to say things that they would not normally say publicly.

SNS are not concerned with how teenagers are managing their private life as far as self-management is concerned. They largely control the norms of the interaction. Technology allows the merging of a stronger interaction, where the device allows teenagers to learn more easily how they appear in public and that risk relies more on the invasion of other aspects of their offline life. The teenagers interviewed admitted dedicating a great deal of time hanging out on these sites, even going as far as connecting when in class, whenever they have the opportunity. This confession causes real tension with parents and also with teachers.

The first set of skills appears to be shared by fewer people. We already mentioned above that people were usually unaware of their privacy exposure on the Internet (Dwyer et al., 2008). The "privacy paradox" highlighted in the literature could also be explained by the lack of understanding of two characteristics of the new media: the width of their scalability and their persistence, (boyd, 2008). French teens are facing the same situation. If more and more profiles are henceforth inaccessible on Facebook, this change relies more on the decision of the platform to make them closed by default rather than by the active initiative of those being observed. When asked about privacy settings, the majority of the youths never customized their profile and a large number of them were unaware of these options. They were aware that it was possible to ascertain a lot of information about individuals: friends, pages and groups, status, profile photos, etc. As far as Skyrock is concerned, this lack of competence becomes very worrying, as the fact that the profiles are visited is actually appreciated by teenagers because it promotes an ingenious game of popularity evaluation measured by the number of visits and comments. As most of the site users were the youngest of the teenagers we analysed, they were both less concerned and less skilful. This allows any invisible audience to surf on the different profiles without any restrictions.

In this paradox lays an important part of the understanding of the lack of privacy management by users of SNS. The fear conveyed by media panics has not urged users to improve their skills. At best some evoke some advice received from their more skilful friends in computing⁷. Users were contradictory when we asked them

if these concerns they evoked strongly, often repeating actual media assertions, had prompted a change of behaviour for them or a greater concern about the privacy settings proposed by SNS, simply indicated their intention to find out more, but without real conviction.

This paradox lies in their incapacity to conceive that these common, ordinary interactions which they believe to be pointless, uninteresting, can end in not so pointless consequences, in contexts which they do not yet know well. Here they did not show either technical skills to protect their data, or abstract skills to identify what information might be dangerous or examined. Finally they develop a resigned attitude towards the risk of being observed (an 18 year old girl tells us "if I withdraw from Facebook, they can still publish everything all the same... so...").

These difficulties in developing skills in privacy management can be linked to a much more worrying and wider question now faced by our western societies in which classic media evolution already raises the problem of a necessary re-definition of what is meant by the notions of privacy, intimacy, public and professional life, and also the connection that each maintains with the others. The risks associated with the decompartmentalization of contexts, which is putting in danger our ability to manage our own personal dimensions, appear to be surmounted in numerous cases by teenagers thanks to classic tools as protection of the face, the role distance and the play with the limits of the social and technical norms framing our interactions (Certeau, 2002). On the other hand, effective management of our private lives in all social spheres is even less possible as these spheres are themselves being redefined.

Two of those questioned nevertheless claimed to have strong skills in selecting information to be diffused and preserving the separation between the various social spheres within which they evolved. They had naturally set up these safety options even before the media panic began and discussed these precautions in a relatively assured and very knowing way. This control can be connected to a skill which they already exercised offline. In individual interviews these two people both declared themselves to be homosexual and that they had to hide this aspect of their identity in certain contexts. They at once made the connection between their everyday life offline and their need for careful usage of SNS. A skill in privacy management offline was thus reinvested in an online context and initiated a technical learning skill with regard to the environment.

5. Conclusion and Perspectives

This study highlights that although privacy management is a problem people have to deal with when they are using SNS, several cases must be highlighted. It all depends on

⁷ This offline learning by friendly mutual help seems to confirm Lewis, Kaufman and Christakis's results (2008)

evoked above : students whose friends have private profiles will tend to possess private profiles too.

who is the observer. It is only future employers that are worrying users, as they believe they can handle both educators as well as predators. This allows us to propose three kinds of actions for educators: let teenagers make their own generational norms, accompany them in their construction of a space away from professional life, and teach them the difference between the possible audiences and how to prevent anyone undesirable to link their online and offline life. Another distinction has to be made between the various kinds of information that people are sharing on these sites. Users agree, and even want, to share most of this information. The main trouble appears to come from the lack of awareness of how public these spaces are. People believe they are in a public place that remains still quite intimate, just as when they are spending time with their friends in offline public places, whereas in fact their personal data can be accessed in a far wider space. This awareness increases as teenagers grow older but the durability of the information they have shared during their first years of using these sites makes them visible for a very long time. Having acknowledged this fact, educational programs taught to students in their first years of university would be better initiated in secondary school. A final distinction must be made between SNS that provide different kinds of privacy settings: Skyrock is available to absolutely anyone and one has to find his own tactics to protect his identity, whereas other sites like Facebook or Myspace offer several levels of visibility for the profiles. As we have seen, privacy cannot be managed only by technical tools or a 'charter of good behaviour'. We have highlighted how teenagers are good at playing with these constraints to build a generational structure for interaction. This interaction structure- remains quite similar to the one people are dealing with in offline contexts. On the other hand, new media give new characteristics to information that people do not seem to be able to deal with: scalability and persistence. Lawyers and educators will have to focus on these particularities to improve the privacy management skills of teenagers in new media concepts.

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